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SUBJECT: UKRAINE: AMBASSADOR'S FAREWELL CALL ON EX-PM
YANUKOVYCH

Classified By: Ambassador for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

¶1. (C) During Ambassador's May 23 farewell call, Party of Regions chief Viktor Yanukovych said he bore Ambassador "no ill will" over the events of the Orange Revolution, commenting that the two had "worked well together." Yanukovych spoke in great detail about his "problems with the law," explaining that he had been imprisoned twice on false charges stemming from a property dispute with an alcoholic police officer neighbor. The former prime minister related that it took four years after his final release from prison, and the intervention of Donetsk-born Soviet Cosmonaut/Supreme Soviet member Georgi Beregovoy, to officially clear his name.

Reflecting on the 2004 presidential election campaign, Yanukovych asserted that he had never really been "Kuchma's man." Yanukovych described a contentious relationship with Kuchma, and lamented that he should have resigned as prime minister in April 2004 to focus solely on his presidential bid. On current politics, Yanukovych boasted that he had enough votes to block the formation of an Orange coalition with Yuliya Tymoshenko as prime minister; President Yushchenko's only real option was to cut a deal with Regions.

Yanukovych claimed that he and Yushchenko had a gentlemen's agreement to work together to defeat Tymoshenko's expected bid for the presidency in 2009. End summary.

No Hard Feelings

¶2. (SBU) Ambassador paid a farewell call May 23 on Party of Regions head Viktor Yanukovych. The former prime minister, the 2004 presidential election/Orange Revolution loser, commented that he "bore no ill will" toward Ambassador and had "worked well together" with him.

Criminal Record: Setting Things Straight?

¶3. (C) Yanukovych described what he called his "problems with the law." Yanukovych had been very poor as a child, living in a village with his grandmother until she died and then in an orphanage until he turned 17; he had left the orphanage "with a lot of money" as he had learned to "play cards well."

Yanukovych had returned to his grandmother's small house, which he inherited, to renovate it and work the land, but had immediately butted heads with an alcoholic neighbor, a police officer, who had illegally taken over part of the Yanukovych family spread. Yanukovych told the cop to get off his land; in retaliation, the cop fabricated a criminal case against him, and Yanukovych went to jail. After his release, Yanukovych again asserted his right to his grandmother's property, which prompted the cop to fabricate another criminal case. Yanukovych said he was given no time to

prepare for his second trial and was actually informed of his trial date as he was preparing to propose to his wife. The trial last a cursory 45 minutes, after which he was again sentenced to jail.

¶4. (C) Outraged about being railroaded a second time, Yanukovych said that he became a difficult charge for his jailers, refusing to eat prison food and subsisting only on food packages sent to him by others. Yanukovych was punished for his intransigence by being put in isolation 14 times, for stints of 7 to 40 days. After being released from prison, Yanukovych said it took him four years to get the local courts to overturn his convictions and officially clear his name -- something, he stressed, that rarely happened in Soviet times. Yanukovych credited Donetsk-born Soviet Cosmonaut Georgi Beregovoy, a longtime Donbas representative in the Supreme Soviet, for taking an interest in his case and getting him exonerated.

Never Really Kuchma's Man

¶5. (C) Reflecting on the tumultuous 2004 presidential election, Yanukovych claimed that he "never really was Kuchma's man." Then President Kuchma had only tapped him to serve as prime minister because he needed the support of Donetsk clan politicians, and had actually tried to engineer Yanukovych's ouster with a rigged Rada vote in April 2003 -- a blow that Yanukovych parried with the aid of then-opposition leaders Yushchenko, Tymoshenko, and Moroz. Yanukovych said his relationship with Kuchma worsened in early 2004, when he suggested that the deeply unpopular Kuchma distance himself from the Yanukovych presidential campaign. Yanukovych said that, in retrospect, he should have resigned as prime minister in April 2004 and hit the

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campaign trail; not resigning, he lamented, had been a "fatal mistake." Kuchma had persuaded influential figures from the Party of Regions (including Rinat Akhmetov) that Yanukovych should stay on as PM. Yanukovych accepted the advice of his party members and ran as "Kuchma's man."

Orange-Blue Coalition Means Stability

¶6. (C) Shifting to the ongoing talks to form a Rada majority coalition, Yanukovych argued that President Yushchenko should cut a deal with the Party of Regions; only an "Orange-Blue" coalition would be stable. Yanukovych claimed he had the votes needed to block Yuliya Tymoshenko from again serving as prime minister. Ticking off specific numbers, Yanukovych asserted that 40 Our Ukraine MPs, 25 Tymoshenko Bloc MPs, and 5-6 Socialist MPs would vote with Regions and the Communists against Tymoshenko. There were enough votes, he emphasized, to block the formation of an Orange coalition with Tymoshenko as prime minister. That left one real option for Yushchenko: make a deal with Regions. Yanukovych claimed that he and Yushchenko had a gentlemen's agreement with regard to the 2009 presidential election. The two would conduct polls in 2009 to see who stood the better chance of beating Tymoshenko; if Yushchenko had the higher numbers, Yanukovych would support him -- and vice-versa.

Herbst